

Chemical spill closes kindergarten: Five young boys suspected; school resumes on Tuesday

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Classes were canceled at the Kindergarten Center today as a private contractor continued cleaning up a toxic combination of chemicals that were spilled during an alleged act of vandalism by juveniles.

Poplar Bluff Police Cpl. Bob Moore responded at 2:30 p.m. Sunday to a report of property damage at the school.

Moore said he made contact with five male juveniles -- ages 7, 8, 11, 12 and 12.

"They advised me of an open door on the west side of the school," Moore said in his report. "...When I opened the door, I was exposed to an unknown chemical that had been spilled on the floor."

According to Moore, when he walked in "I noticed a haze in the air and oil on the floor that was bubbling. There was a foul smell."

At that point, Moore said, he backed off, secured the area and requested additional officers and the Poplar Bluff Fire Department respond.



Members of the Poplar Bluff Hazardous Materials Response Team and the Department of Natural Resources on-scene coordinator Jackson Bostic exit the Mark Twain Kindergarten Center Sunday after their initial entry into a basement storage area where chemicals were spilled, creating a toxic combination. The school was closed Monday. (DAR/Paul Davis)

Assistant Fire Chief Sam Parks said incident command was set up at Mill and Mary streets.

"We roped the area off and kept everyone out with the help of the police," explained Parks. "We evacuated the residences around the school on Apple and Mary, probably eight households."

Emergency medical services personnel responded and checked out Moore, as well as the juveniles at the scene.

Parks said the Department of Natural Resources was notified and DNR on-scene coordinator Jackson Bostic responded.

After meeting with the incident commander, Bostic said, he requested additional support from the Poplar Bluff Regional Hazardous Materials Response Team.

"They brought out additional technicians," Bostic explained. "We utilized four technicians from the team -- one additional person for entry with me, two additional people for back-up and decontamination personnel."

"Decontamination was set up and law enforcement secured the area and worked with local residents to inform them of the situation."

While those closest were evacuated, other nearby residents were told "that they should remain in their homes with the doors closed until otherwise told."

Poplar Bluff Fire Capt. Stacy Harmon, Shift Commander Jerry Keirse and Firefighter Jeff Hale "suited up," along with Bostic, Parks said.

"When we made entry, we observed a yellow to amber colored substance lying in the floor and on the table," Bostic explained. "This substance was giving off a chemical reaction (bubbling) and eating into the tile floor."

What complicated the situation was that the alleged vandals destroyed a cabinet that held a lot of paints and art supplies. Bostic said.

"That confused the responders," Bostic explained. "We had a lot of reds, blues, greens and it caused us to make several entries into the building."

"You can only work on air 15 to 18 minutes before you have to come back out. The haz-mat team went through several bottles of air."

Bostic described this as being a "very dangerous" situation that posed a threat to anyone whose skin came into contact with the substance or inhaled the fumes.

Once the situation was assessed, Moore was sent to Three Rivers Healthcare-North Campus where he was decontaminated before he was evaluated. The children's parents were told they also needed to go to the hospital.

Bostic said the entry team took a pH reading, as well as monitored for radiological activity and volatile organics, which are petroleum based chemicals.

According to Bostic, they got two pH readings.

"We got an acid reading, as well as a reading for a base," Bostic explained. "That is what made this potentially dangerous because of the mixture of these chemicals.

"A lot of chemicals are not compatible with one another. Acids and bases are not compatible with one another. In their normal containers, they are safe."

When those containers are breached and the substances mix, "they can create heat, as well as a violent explosion," Bostic said.

Some of the substances, such as some cleaning chemicals, were known, but there were also some unknown substances in the building, Bostic said.

"At that time, the entry team collected a sample of the substance released onto the floor," Bostic explained.

That sample was taken back to DNR's emergency response truck where the "chemical characteristics" were evaluated, Bostic said.

"We checked it for pH again and to see if it was flammable and (whether) it was water reactive," Bostic said.

While the substance was not flammable, it had a pH of 13, Bostic said.

"We did try to neutralize the sample to see if it could be done," Bostic explained. "It created a tremendous amount of heat."

"At that time, the hazardous materials team decided it was not safe for us to do a clean-up ourselves based on that chemical reaction."

Bostic said they spoke with school officials and recommended the school district hire an environmental contractor to come in, clean up and certify that the building was safe.

"We offered and provided technical assistance to them by allowing them to use our state contractor," Bostic explained. "The state contractor has hired a third-party contractor to come in and certify the building is clean once the clean up is completed."

After arriving at about midnight from St. Louis, the contractor worked until about 3 a.m. and then resumed this morning.

According to Poplar Bluff R-1 Superintendent Randy Winston, school officials wanted to "err on the side of safety" with this situation.

"DNR tested it and recommended we have a clean-up crew and that is what we did," Winston said. "...We want to make sure we have everything safe for the kids before they return to the building."

"Once the air monitoring (comes back) OK, we'll return."

Air monitoring was done this morning and the contractor was "getting a clean air sample," Winston said.

Someone with the health department also has to "sign off" before classes can resume in the building; however, kindergarten will be held on Tuesday even if it is at another location, Winston said.

"We'll have school tomorrow and I'm 95 percent sure it will be at Mark Twain," Winston said.

Bostic wanted to commend the school district for "their actions and what they are doing. They went as far as possible to make sure this is being cleaned up right."

"You're never really prepared for these types of things, but they got on it and got it taken care of."

Bostic described the response as being well organized Sunday.

"Law enforcement, fire, state and local (agencies) worked as a team and brought a potentially serious situation under control pretty quick," Bostic explained.

The clean-up costs will fall onto the school district to pay, Winston said.

In addition, the district "missed out" on state aid for 320 students today, Winston said.

"(The contractor) arrived at midnight and worked the remainder of the night," Winston said. "(Clean up) will be quite expensive.

"The expense is not the object, but the safety of the kids."

If students were the ones "to break in, then there's a good possibility disciplinary action will be taken," said Winston. "Hopefully, the legal system will also become involved."